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ABSTRACT

A sample of students were surveyed who were enrolled at the University of Washington during the autumn quarter of 1977 but did not continue at the university the following quarter. Survey items included: reasons for not continuing, occupational status as of spring 1978, effect of not continuing on present occupation and plans for the future, expectation of returning to the university in the future to take additional coursework, and primary reason for selecting the university. Respondents were grouped according to their first-mentioned reason for not continuing: graduated, financial, on leave, family/health problems, transferring to another University of Washington program or another university, dissatisfied with the university, job/career related, wanted "time off," and other. Responses to the remaining survey items are analyzed for each of the nine category groups. (Author/SW)

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The Non-Continuing Student: A Study of the Causes and Educational Implications of Interrupting Collegiate Studies at the University of Washington

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The current study was comprised of a sample of students who were enrolled Autumn Quarter 1977 but who did not continue to be enrolled at the University the following quarter. Items included in the survey were: reasons for not continuing, occupational status as of spring 1978, effect of not continuing on present occupation and plans for the future, expectation of returning to the UW in the future to take additional coursework, and primary reason for selecting to study at the University. Respondents were grouped according to their first-mentioned reason for not continuing: graduated, financial, on leave, family/health problems, transferring to another UW program/another university, dissatisfied with the UW, job/career related, wanted "time off", and other. Then, separately for each of the 9 non-continuing categories, responses to the remaining survey items were analyzed.

Educational Assessment Center Project # 645

The Non-Continuing Student: A Study of the Causes and Educational Implications of Interrupting Collegiate Studies at the University of Washington

Why do students not complete their course of studies at the University of Washington (UW)? Obviously, there is not one reason since the phenomenon of attrition is multi-faceted, including not only those who drop out and those who transfer but also those who "stop out", a phrase employed by Cope and Hannah (1975) to describe those who take time out from their studies only to return to academics some time in the future. However, no matter what is specifically meant when the term attrition is used, in general, withdrawing from collegiate studies brings forth negative connotations both for the institution and the student. To the collegiate institution this negativity is typically expressed in terms of money spent on teaching those who do not complete their degree programs. To the student it is often stated either in terms of lost earning potential or in remarks reflecting disappointment for not having finished what he/she had originally set out to do, that is, to obtain a college degree. But this negativity may be unwarranted and, as Cope and Hannah have suggested, the focus should be placed on "looking at college attrition in a nonpejorative sense [which then] allows for greater depth in probing student and college differences" (p. vii). Inasmuch as the term attrition/dropping out has such negative connotations, a less pejorative term "non-continuing", will be employed for this study on UW attrition. The term, non-continuing, in addition to being less pejorative also allows greater breadth in discussions since it can include those who don't continue because of graduating as well as those who drop out, stop out, and transfer.

Of course, one other important reason for not completing a degree program would be financial. While students can find themselves short of funds at practically any period during their collegiate years, the University was particularly concerned about the impact of its most recent undergraduate tuition increase which was initiated in the 1977-1978 academic year. Therefore, in order to examine the impact of this tuition increase, the University undertook a survey of its non-continuing students. Specifically, the current study was comprised of a sample of students who had been enrolled in Autumn

Quarter 1977 but who did not continue to be enrolled the following quarter, Winter Quarter 1978. Items included in the survey were: reason for not continuing, the effect of not continuing, expectation of returning to the UW in the future to take additional coursework, and primary reason for selecting to study at the UW. Not only would such a survey enable the University to assess the impact of the above-mentioned tuition increase, but it would also provide data on some of the broader issues involved in why students discontinue or interrupt their studies at the UW. What are the main reasons cited by these ex-students for not continuing their studies? When categorized according to reason for not continuing, how do they differ in their perception of the impact of interrupting their collegiate studies?

Method

Sample. A list was supplied by the UW's Registrar's Office which contained the names of all students who had been enrolled at the University for Autumn Quarter 1977 but who were not enrolled Winter Quarter 1978. Students who were classified as either nonmatriculated or returning for a second bachelor's degree (formerly called fifth-year status) were eliminated leaving a total of 4,188 non-continuing students (3,842 residents and 346 nonresidents). From this total group a sample of 400 was selected, half Washington State residents and half nonresidents. For the resident subsample, approximately every 25th resident on the computer list was selected, but, since there was a much smaller number of nonresidents, about every other nonresident was selected.

Survey. During Spring Quarter 1978 all students in the sample were surveyed by telephone. Those for whom no telephone number was available were mailed a copy of the survey. Besides residency status and collegiate class, the survey itself contained 5 open-ended items of interest: reason for not continuing; occupational status as of spring 1978 (i.e., student, employed, or other); effect of not continuing on present occupation and plans for the future; expectation of returning to the UW sometime in the future as a student; and reason for initially choosing to attend the University.

Results

Of the total group slightly less than half responded (N = 182 or 46%).

The proportions of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, seniors, and graduate students in the group of respondents (10%, 7%, 16%, 15%, and 52%, respectively) closely paralleled that of the total group (12%, 10%, 17%, 16%, and 45%, respectively). However, there was a disparity when the respondents were grouped according to their residency status (recall that the sample of 400 was comprised of 200 residents and 200 nonresidents), with over two-thirds of the residents responding (N = 114 or 62%) vs. only about one-third of the nonresidents (N = 69 or 38%). While it is difficult to know for certain, it is highly probable that one major factor contributing to the relatively low overall response rate was that the addresses available were about 6 months old at the time of the survey and more than likely out-of-date.

Table 1 presents the distribution of respondents according to the first-mentioned reason given by each respondent in reply to the survey item asking: "What were the reasons for your withdrawing as a student from the UW?" Responses fell into 9 broad categories, summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Reason for Not Continuing Studies at the University

Reason	N (%)
Graduated	51 (28)
Financial	23 (13)
On leave	17 (9)
Family/health problems	14 (8)
Transferring to another UW program/another university	18 (10)
Dissatisfied with the UW	20 (11)
Job/career related	18 (10)
Wanted "time off", "a breather"	10 (5)
Other	12 (7)
Total N	183 (100)

Since the remainder of this report will use these 9 categories as the break-out variable, it is important that the scope of responses included in each

category be understood. Therefore, for each category several replies are included in the following:

graduated (self-explanatory);

financial - "lost her scholarship", "out-of-state fees were prohibitive", "lost her job so no money for tuition", "had personal finances to resolve";

on leave - "working on dissertation", "went out to do fieldwork", "putting in residency in Spokane", "Nursing School runs 4 quarters on and 1 off and Winter Quarter was her quarter off";

family/health problems - "had a baby", "had surgery", "father had open heart surgery - returned to East to be with the family";

transferring to another UW program/another university - "decided to take 2 quarters off to study dance and drama", "applied for entrance to Business School and admitted for Spring Quarter - worked Winter Quarter", "going to another school and changed majors";

dissatisfied with the UW - "University is too big, likes smaller community", "didn't like program at the U", "quality of the class attended autumn '77 was of such low caliber...and thus decided it best to withdraw from... [the University]";

job/career related - "working full-time", "teaching job - too hard to go to school also", "conflict with work schedule";

wanted "time off", "a breather" - "to go on a cruise", "I already had one master's degree and didn't have the incentives needed to keep me going in another program";

other - "on probation", "couldn't find housing for Winter Quarter, so returned to California", "working on an Incomplete", "had to attend in evening and classes weren't offered".

As one can readily see, the statements included under each category are quite varied with the final category, "other", containing the most heterogeneous set of responses as might be expected. Specifically, of the 12

respondents in this category 5 indicated that they were barred from continuing at the UW because of low scholarship, 2 reported that they were working on incompletes, 2 missed registration deadlines, 1 indicated that housing was not available, another replied that she/he had to attend in the evening and that classes were not offered then, while another remarked that she/he took advantage of staff's ability to attend classes and that she/he has taken classes off-and-on since starting her/his job at the UW. In addition, the "financial" category also contained a broad range of responses and was not limited to "complaints" about the undergraduate tuition increase. Overall, the three most frequently mentioned reasons for not continuing were "graduated", "financial", and "dissatisfied with the UW" (28%, 13%, and 11%, respectively).

What was their occupational status at the time this survey was conducted i.e., as of Spring Quarter 1978? Table 2 presents the replies to this survey question separately for each category presented in Table 1. Responses to this item were broadly categorized as either student, employed, or other (ex., unemployed and looking for work). Overall, the bulk was employed (N = 111 or 62%). When the responses were examined separately within each category student status was most frequently cited by those who went on leave and those who had transferred (75% and 78%, respectively), while being employed most often cited by those in the graduated, financial, dissatisfied with the UW, job/career and other categories (84%, 65%, 70%, 83%, and 83%, respectively).

What effect did not continuing with their studies have on their present occupation and plans for the future? Table 3 presents the results of this survey question separately for each of the categories for not continuing. Overall, the responses by this group of students lent support to the statement of Cope and Hannah, mentioned earlier, which stressed the nonpejorative nature of stopping out, dropping out, or transferring. That is, the overwhelming majority of the total group considered not continuing to be either neutral (67%) or positive (25%). Remarks categorized as positive included those statements expressing the opinion that not continuing allowed for a re-evaluation of educational/career plans, for ex., one respondent replied that not continuing had "a good effect. [I] slowed down and looked around at goals, and earned enough money to relax, come back, and study without money worries." Another frequently mentioned

Table 2

Occupational Status as of Spring Quarter 1978 by Reason for Not Continuing

Status	Graduated	Financial	On leave	Family/ health	Trans- ferring	Dissatis. with UW	Job/career	Time off	Other	Total
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Student	3 (6)	6 (26)	12 (75)	5 (39)	14 (78)	4 (20)	2 (11)	2 (22)	2 (17)	50 (28)
Employed	43 (84)	15 (65)	4 (25)	4 (31)	3 (17)	14 (70)	15 (83)	3 (33)	10 (83)	111 (62)
Other	5 (10)	2 (9)	---	4 (31)	1 (6)	2 (10)	1 (6)	4 (44)	---	19 (11)
Total	51 (100)	23 (100)	16 (100)	13 (100)	18 (100)	20 (100)	18 (100)	9 (100)	12 (100)	180 (100)

Note. There were 3 students who did not respond to this item.

Table 3

Effect of Not Continuing by Reason for Not Continuing

Effect	Graduated	Financial	On leave	Family/ health	Trans- ferring	Dissatis. with UW	Job/career	Time off	Other	Total
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
None	47 (92)	12 (52)	13 (76)	10 (71)	13 (72)	9 (45)	7 (39)	4 (40)	8 (67)	123 (67)
Positive	4 (8)	6 (26)	4 (24)	2 (14)	4 (22)	9 (45)	8 (44)	6 (60)	2 (17)	45 (25)
Negative	---	5 (22)	---	2 (14)	1 (6)	2 (10)	3 (17)	---	2 (17)	15 (8)
Total	51 (100)	23 (100)	17 (100)	14 (100)	18 (100)	20 (100)	18 (100)	10 (100)	12 (100)	183 (100)

positive effect was that not being in school allowed the respondent to pursue a "satisfying alternative", such as raising a family, travel, and/or enabled the respondent to work at a job which was career-related. While negative effects were cited by only 8% of the total group, about one-fifth of the respondents in the financial, job/career, and other categories indicated negative effects would result from not continuing. Two frequently mentioned negative effects were, first, statements indicating that there would be a temporary delay in finishing the degree program and, secondly, statements expressing the opinion that opportunities for advancement in one's career field would be limited or take longer to achieve.

Table 4 presents plans for future education by reason for not continuing. Educational plans were broadly categorized into one of four alternatives: will definitely return to the University, may return to the University, will attend another college or university, and no future educational plans. For the total group, over half (N = 91 or 51%) indicated that they would definitely be returning to the UW. Those who graduated and who had expressed dissatisfaction with the University were the most atypical respondents. The graduates were about equally divided between returning to the UW and no future educational plans (41% and 36%, respectively). Those who were dissatisfied with the UW were the least likely to be definitely attending the UW in the future (35%) and the most likely to be attending another college/university in the future (40%).

Lastly, separately for each of the non-continuing categories, Table 5 presents responses to the survey item asking: What was the primary reason for attending the University? Responses to this open-ended item were categorized as follows: location of the University, quality of a specific program or course of studies offered at the UW, general reputation of the UW, that the UW was affordable (for ex., because of a scholarship or because of in-state tuition), that the UW had been strongly recommended, attended the University because it was near a family member or relative, and other. For the total group the location and the quality of a specific program offered were the two most frequently cited reasons, each receiving about 35% of the responses. The quality of a specific program offered was the primary reason for choosing to attend the UW for four categories (graduated, on leave, transferring, and time off with 44%, 44%, 38%, and 50%,

Table 4

Plans for Future Education by Reason for Not Continuing

Educational Plan	Graduated	Financial	On leave	Family/ health	Trans- ferring	Dissatis. with UW	Job/career	Time off	Other	Total
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Will return to UW	18 (41)	12 (55)	14 (93)	9 (75)	10 (67)	7 (35)	9 (50)	4 (57)	8 (67)	91 (55)
May return to UW	6 (14)	7 (32)	1 (7)	2 (17)	---	4 (20)	5 (28)	2 (29)	3 (25)	30 (18)
Attend other college	4 (9)	2 (9)	---	---	4 (27)	8 (40)	2 (11)	1 (14)	1 (8)	22 (13)
None	16 (36)	1 (5)	---	1 (8)	1 (7)	1 (5)	2 (11)	---	---	22 (13)
Total	44 (100)	22 (100)	15 (100)	12 (100)	15 (100)	20 (100)	18 (100)	7 (100)	12 (100)	165 (100)

Note. 18 respondents did not reply to this item.

Table 5

Primary Reason for Choosing to Attend the University by Reason for Not Continuing

Reason for Choosing	Graduated	Financial	On leave	Family/ health	Trans- ferring	Dissatis. with UW	Job/career	Time off	Other	Total
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Location	11 (24)	6 (26)	3 (19)	5 (45)	5 (31)	8 (40)	10 (56)	3 (38)	6 (50)	57 (34)
Program offered	20 (44)	5 (22)	7 (44)	4 (36)	6 (38)	7 (35)	4 (22)	4 (50)	3 (25)	61 (36)
UW's reputation	3 (7)	6 (26)	2 (13)	---	2 (13)	3 (15)	1 (6)	---	1 (8)	18 (11)
Affordable	3 (7)	---	2 (13)	1 (9)	1 (7)	---	1 (6)	1 (13)	---	9 (5)
Recommended	3 (7)	---	1 (6)	1 (9)	---	1 (5)	---	---	1 (8)	7 (4)
To be near family	5 (11)	4 (17)	1 (6)	---	---	---	1 (6)	---	---	11 (6)
Other	---	2 (9)	---	---	2 (13)	1 (5)	1 (6)	---	1 (8)	7 (4)
Total	45 (100)	23 (100)	16 (100)	11 (100)	16 (100)	20 (100)	18 (100)	8 (100)	12 (100)	170 (100)

Note. There were 13 respondents who did not reply to this survey item.

respectively) while the location of the University was the most frequently cited reason for the remaining categories of financial (tied with general reputation of the UW each having 26%), family/health problems (45%), dissatisfied with the UW (40%), job/career (56%), and other (50%).

Discussion

The current study on the reasons for not continuing enrollment at the University is a good beginning. First, from this survey it is obvious that the reasons for not continuing are quite varied, ranging from those who decide to take some time off for a trip, for example, to those who lost a scholarship due to low grades. It was unfortunate, however, that the response rate was low and this fact necessitated that a number of valid subcategories of interest (such as those who left because of low scholarship) were lumped together under the catch-all category of "other." Second, at least among this group of respondents, the tuition increase was not cited as a major reason for not continuing. Third, the nonpejorative nature of not continuing, stressed by Cope and Hannah, was supported by this survey with the overwhelming majority considering it to be either neutral (67%) or positive (25%). Lastly, except for those categorized as not continuing because of having graduated or those who were dissatisfied with the UW, the majority of respondents in the 7 remaining categories indicated that they would definitely be returning to the UW in the future to study.

The current study will serve as an effective model for future studies of this nature at the University. In order to increase the response rate in such future studies, it is recommended that students be contacted much sooner after leaving the University. This would serve two important goals: first, it would not allow the passage of time to cloud the ex-students' memories about the actual reason(s) for not continuing their studies at the UW; and, secondly, by contacting them at an earlier date, perhaps the quarter after leaving, the addresses available at the UW might not be as out-of-date as they were in the current survey. In addition to contacting students who do not continue at an earlier date, it is also suggested that such ex-students be tracked longitudinally. This would also help better define the scope of the

picture of the non-continuing student at the UW. Lastly, it is of interest to note that the respondents themselves were truly appreciative that the survey was being conducted, as one stated "... [I think] this survey is great--that the U really cares that someone dropped out and why." It is hoped that such studies be conducted periodically in order to better serve the consumers of the University's educational offerings.

Reference

Cope, R., & Hannah, W. Revolving college doors: The causes and consequences of dropping out, stopping out, and transferring. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1975.